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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the unique characteristics of rural adolescents raised on farms. As part of a longitudinal study on rural youth development, semistructured interviews were conducted each year for 4 consecutive years with 87 adolescents from 4 rural high schools in upstate New York. This study focused on data from the 19 adolescents who resided on farms and a matched sample of nonfarm adolescents. The interviews explored student perceptions of community, school, family, social life, and self. Farm raised adolescents were particularly close to their families and somewhat isolated from peers and peer-related activities. They were less likely than their nonfarm counterparts to plan on pursuing a 4-year college degree, and they were very unlikely to plan on remaining on the farm. Adolescent farm residents seemed to share a unique value system, strong work ethic, and strong self-identity as farmers. Most felt that this was positive, resulting in closeness with nature and animals and a sense of satisfaction and responsibility from the difficult work schedule and varied challenges involved in farming. Perceived limitations were an inability to relate to nonfarming peers, lack of free time, and difficulty pursuing outside interests. Except for closeness to nature, these characteristics were more pronounced among males in the farm sample than in females. (SV)

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Comparing Rural Adolescents from Farm and Nonfarm Families

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Abstract

This study explores the unique characteristics of rural adolescents who are raised on farms. We are interested in four main aspects of their lives: a) their involvement in their communities and relationships with peers, b) their relationships with their families, c) their personal values and self concepts, and d) their ideas and plans for the future. We compared 19 farm raised adolescents with a matched sample of nonfarm rural adolescents. The interviews, which are qualitative in nature, explore perceptions of their communities, schools, families, social lives and self concepts. The interpretive analyses indicate that the farm raised adolescents are particularly close to their families and somewhat isolated from their peers and from peer related activities. They are less likely than their nonfarm counterparts to plan on pursuing a four year college degree, and very unlikely to plan on remaining on the farm. They also seem to share a unique value system and self identity as farmers. Most felt that this was positive, resulting in an appreciation of and closeness with nature and animals, and a sense of satisfaction and responsibility from the difficult work schedule and variety of challenges involved in farming. However, several identified limitations that resulted from their farm rearing, such as an inability to relate to nonfarming peers, a lack of free time and a difficulty pursuing outside interests. In most areas, the males within the farm sample were more pronounced in these differences than the females.

The rapid economic downturn of rural communities in general and of family farms in particular has forced many rural adolescents who are raised on farms to think more globally about their plans for the future. When attempting to understand how farm raised adolescents adapt to these changes, it is important to recognize what their personal values are and how they come to make life decisions. A key aspect of their personal development, it seems, is the quality of the close and supportive relationships in their lives.

The purpose of this study is to better understand how adolescents from farm families perceive their support networks and how their personal values, self identities and future plans develop. This will be accomplished by focusing our study on the exploration of four main aspects of their lives: a) their involvement in their communities and relationships with peers, b) their relationships with their families, c) their personal values and self concepts, and d) their ideas and plans for the future.

Background

It has been asserted that farm families, in general, tend to view the family unit as being a central aspect of their lives. They have also been found to be somewhat isolated from their neighbors and non family members (Beker, Eskovitz, & Guttman, 1987; Hedlund & Berkowitz, 1979). There is evidence that they are particularly reluctant to communicate with outsiders as a means of coping with stress (Weigal & Weigal, 1987). Thus, their self reliance is evident.

Not suprisingly, youths from farm families have also been found to be reluctant to share personal information with non family members. When they do seek support, they usually go to close friends and less frequently to adults (Van Hook, 1990). In addition, several studies have shown that youths from farm families are typically more parent oriented than peer oriented (Floyd & South, 1972; Larson, 1974).

The literature examining the impact of the farm crisis indicates that families with failing farms have been experiencing not only a great deal of stress, but also an increasing amount of isolation from their neighbors in the community (Wright & Rosenblatt, 1987). Children and adolescents from these families often begin exhibiting behavioral problems. These problems may be academic, emotional or both (Peeks, 1989; Van Hook,1990). Fewer farm children are choosing to remain on their farms, creating additional stress in their own lives, as well as in their families' (Hedlund & Berkowitz, 1979). Finally, it has been noted that studies examining both farm and nonfarm rural adolescents have generally relied on obtaining information from the parents or other sources and rarely from the adolescents themselves (Hedlund, 1993; Beker et al, 1987).

Project Summary

The present study is part of a larger, ongoing study "Program in Rural Youth Development" (Project PRYDe). Project PRYDe is a qualitative study that has been in progress over the last four years. The study seeks to understand the perceptions

of rural adolescents through interpretive interviews with 87 adolescents from four rural schools in upstate New York. Each school represents one of the four degrees of rurality, as described by Eberts (1984), which are defined by the size of the largest town in the county, distance to a metropolitan center and percentage of residents traveling outside of the county for employment. The participants were volunteers with parental permission required. The students in this study tend to have a higher level of academic achievement and socioeconomic status than is representative of the total student population in each school. Generalizations made from this study should take this nonrepresentativeness into account. Participants have been interviewed with a semi-structured protocol each year for four consecutive years. The interviews were designed to focus on the participants' perceptions of their communities, schools, families, social interaction and self identity (see Hedlund, 1993, for a more detailed description).

Method

The present study examines the data of each farm raised adolescent in the entire sample. Of the original 87 participants, 19 resided on farms. These adolescents were then matched with a set of nonfarm adolescents according to grade level, gender, geographic location and, when possible academic achievement and socioeconomic status. Interviews conducted during the 1990-91 academic year were analyzed for this study. It is felt that by comparing the lives of the farm raised adolescents to the otherwise similar rural adolescents, we would get a real sense of

the unique characteristics that these adolescents have *as a result of* being raised on a family farm.

Analyses

The analyses are interpretive and descriptive. The coding system being used breaks down the narrative text into smaller segments that fall into one of the conceptual variables defined by the structure of the interview (community, school, family, social or self). The second and third level codes were developed inductively by three raters reading the interviews and comparing notes (Miles & Huberman, 1994). Examples of second level codes include general descriptions, peers, sexual relations, drugs and alcohol. Third level codes identify the specific attitudes, behaviors and involvement in the second level codes. For example, a participant describing his or her own use of drugs would be coded as self, drugs, use (@SLF %DRG %UZE). The macro facility of WordPerfect for the Macintosh is being used to enter codes and move coded segments into summary documents (Reid, 1992). The interviews are each coded independently by two coders and then compared and checked for interrater reliability. In addition, the principal investigator has been providing ongoing, systematic quality control checks for each coding team.

In the present study, codes that related to participants' family relations, peer relations, activity involvement, future plans and personal values were searched and isolated. In addition, all interviews were manually searched to obtain any other "hidden" information that seemed pertinent. Once the data were obtained, a

content analysis was done to identify themes which emerged from the interviews. In addition, a quantitative comparision of the two groups (farm and nonfarm) was made in each of the target areas. The percentage of participants in each group that were 1) family oriented vs. peer oriented, 2) involved in more than one activity, 3) planning on attending college vs. other career options, and 4) the differences between genders within each sample were compared.

Findings

The findings are considered within three organizing frameworks. The first framework is family and peer involvement, the second is future plans and the final is self identity. For convenience, the areas of family relationships and peer relationships and activities are discussed within one comprehensive framework. In each framework, the quanitative information is presented first, followed by an interpretive analysis and, in most cases, a descriptive segment of interview text.

Family and Peer Involvement

The findings of this study confirm the earlier findings of Floyd and South (1972) and Larson (1974), which asserted that farm raised adolescents are more parent than peer oriented. The farm raised adolescents were much more likely to confide in their parents than were the nonfarm raised adolescents. Sixty-eight percent of the farm sample indicated that they were close to and confided in parents

over peers, as opposed to 26% of the nonfarm sample. Likewise, a total of 84% of the nonfarm sample described themselves as confiding in peers most frequently, as opposed to 52% of the farm sample. Approximately 10% of the farm and nonfarm samples each described themselves as confiding in both peers and parents with equal frequency, thus accounting for the disparity in percentages.

The farm participants were much more likely to describe their sources of support as family members. They also described their family relationships as more close and supportive than the nonfarm group. They often describe passing up social events to spend time with their families. For example, this recent female high school graduate described her relationship with her family in the following way:

> I think I sort of saw myself different from other families or other people in [her community] just because of the things that I did versus the things that they did. Like, they would go out and party whereas I would sit home on a Friday night and just, you know, be with my family. Family was important to me, whereas I think a lot of people didn't really, um, see their family as an important part of their life. And since I've come out here so far away I've learned that my family is very important in my life, and, you know, it helps me a lot to know that they're back home and they support me in everything I do. You know, in other, I think in other kids' lives they don't realize that. So, I think the thing that has most influenced me as in living in [her community] is that I really had to, um, stick to what I believed in, and you know, what my religion is.

Another participant, a 10th grade boy described his family relationship, (I: indicates interviewer and P: indicates participant):

> I: I guess we can move on to the family. From what I read in the other interview it seems pretty important to you.

P: Uhuh.
I: How would you describe your family?
P: Umm, very close and ummm, everybody does everything together. Nobody does anything alone. Really close.
I: Umm, what do you think makes your family so strong and close?
P: My parents.
I: How do they help you?
P: They make us discuss everything. If we want to do something we discuss it with the family first.

Within the farm sample, this was even more pronounced with males than females. Although both followed the above described pattern, the males did so with an even greater frequency than the females. The male farm participants were the most likely to confide in their parents and the least likely to confide in their peers. The nonfarm participants frequently described their patterns of confiding as just the opposite. They tended to confide most in their peers and less frequently in their parents. There was also much less of a discrepency between the males and females within the nonfarm sample. This nonfarm, recently graduated female described her relationship with her family in the following way:

I: OK, Umm... who in the family do you confide in... if you have something to talk about?
P: Umm... I never really confided in my family. You know, sometimes my parents but not really. You know [my sister's] too much of a chance of "I'm going to blackmail you with this". And [my other sister's] too young. So it was ... my boyfriend and I really, we talked a lot. I didn't really confide in, you know as far as most personal things went, it wasn't really my family.

The same pattern emerged for activity involvement. The farm sample had far less involvement in school and community activities than did the nonfarm

sample. The activities in which they were involved tended to be geared towards their animal and farming interests as well, such as participating in 4-H groups or membership in the Future Farmers of America (FFA). The nonfarm participants were much more likely to be involved in sports and other activities, such as Student Council. Fifty-two percent of the farm sample were involved in school and community activities as opposed to 78% of the nonfarm sample. There was a discrepency here again, in the proportion of females and males involved in outside activities within the farm sample. The farm females did not differ all that significantly from their nonfarm counterparts with regards to activity involvement. The males in the farm group had by far less involvement in activities than all other participants. Reasons given by the farm sample for not participating in activities were most frequently a lack of time or a lack of any real interest. Another often cited reason was a lack of transportation, as most of the farms are quite a distance from the school or the downtown areas of their communities. This lack of peer activity involvement and reliance on family over peers may have an isolating effect on these individuals. However this seems to be a sacrifice that they willingly make. This 11th grade farm female describes her feelings about missing out on social activities:

> I: How do you feel about your involvement in the school social life?
> P: I don't have very much involvement in it personally, but a lot of other people, they do. They're here every night for sports.
> I: How do you feel about that? How do you feel about your involvement?
> P: I like it because I have other things that I like to do at home with the farm and stuff.

Similarly, this 12th grade male describes the effect of farming on his social life:

> I: OK, tell me about your farm.
> S: Um, well I do most everything except when I'm in school.
> I: Uh huh, does that limit how much you can be involved in social activities at school?
> S: Uh, yeah. Not really 'cause I'm not much of a person to be in with a group of people. I'm better off myself, off being alone or in a small group. 'Cause as I grew up I was the only person around in the area so I learned to do things on my own.

Although these adolescents recognize that their social activities have been limited as a result of their farm upbringing, they seem to have adapted to this lifestyle and have found solitary interests, values, and a self definition that compensates for their lack of involvement in social activities.

Future Plans

The majority of the nonfarm sample planned to immediately pursue a traditional education, while there were a variety of responses from the farm sample. Although clearly the minority (15% of the farm group), it appears that some children of farmers look forward to taking over the farm after their parents retire. As one farm raised male stated when questioned about his future plans:

> I: Do you see that eventually that you will be taking over the farm?
> P: Yes, I do.
> I: What kinds of things do you think about? Certainly there are times when you're working on the farm when you think you don't have to really be concentrating on what your doing. At those times what do you think about?
> P: About things that can help us in farming. The idea of having a new barn or getting more modern. Other things that I like to do.

However, there were a few participants in the farm sample who expressed a real concern over the future of the family farm. This male high school senior expressed the fear that several others alluded to:

> I: So it's pretty tough to keep a farm going here?
> P: Anyplace it's tough. Yeah, a lot of farms going out around here.
> I: So what do you think? Where do you think farming around here is going to go? In say 10 years?
> P: What farming? There ain't going to be no such thing as farming in ten years. The government's gonna starve themselves, that's the way it is. Oh, we got a big surplus of this and a surplus of that--forget it. We ain't got no surplus. Right now the milk companies are lowering prices to put the little farmer out of business and bring the big farmer in business for mass quantity. It's working the other way around. The little farmer is digging deeper and it's putting the big farmer out. That's killing a lot of co-ops and plants, a lot of plants are going under.
> I: Is that just around here or all over?
> P: It's all over.
> I: So you think that maybe in ten, fifteen years that....
> P: We'll have like a powdered cow or something. We'll have powdered everything

For many of these families, the futures of their farms were uncertain, possibly accounting for the 52% of the farm participants planning on heading immediately to college and a non agricultural major after graduation. They may very well fear the instability of a future career in farming and are instead preparing themselves for other occupations. Only one female in the farm group planned on both attending college and returning to farming. A quarter of the farm sample were considering options such as entering a trade school or the military. There were no significant gender differences in plans within the farm and nonfarm group, with the exception

of a slightly greater frequency of females planning to attend college than farm males. Taken together, it appears that hardly any of the farm sample plans on taking over the family farm as a future occupation.

Self Identity

The personal values of the farm participants were often directly attributed to farming. Half the sample described a sense of pride and responsibility that they experienced when working. They described themselves as being hard working and believing in a strong work ethic. In fact, many of them called themselves "workaholics" and were proud of their work related accomplishments. Several of them stated that they felt these values were a result of being raised on a farm. This is a real contrast from the nonfarm sample, where only 15% described themselves as hardworking and responsible. This sense of pride and responsibility was also twice as likely to be true for the males than the females within the farm sample. The males in the farm sample were more likely than any other sample to define themselves in terms of their work values and pride. Here is how a 10th grade farm male described it:

> I: What like, tell me about the farm because I'm not from a farm, so I have no idea what it's like. I've visited a few but...
> P: There's a lot of hard work, uh,
> I: What kind of chores do you do. Cause I remember you mentioned that also.
> P: Yeah, I milk cows, put the milking machines out, feed grain and hay to cows, and I do baling in the summer time, and plowing. Just jobs that I can do, and whatever I can't do, Dad does.
> I: So you help out a lot.
> P: Yeah.

I: How do you think that has affected you by doing all the chores, has that affected you as a person?
S: Makes me think I'm more responsible. He can let me out there and let me do what I think needs to be done.
I: And you know what to do and you'll do it yourself.
S: Yeah.

Another 12th grade farm male describes it like this:

I: You're obviously planning on staying with the farm and making that your career. What is it about farming that has value?
P: The challenge.
I: Okay, tell me about that.
P: The challenge of making it, keeping the, as we say at home, keeping the debt collectors off the steps. And being able to see your accomplishments right away, that if you spend more time say keeping the barn clean then people come in and remark at that. Take pride in all you do and the way you do things.

For these participants, particularly the males, their farm upbringing served to foster a strong sense of determination and pride when pursuing and succeeding in their accomplishments. The nonfarm participants, were much more likely to list values such as believing in school and valuing friends.

Another striking farming related value was the deep feeling of closeness to nature and animals. Farm participants felt that this was largely the result of being raised on a farm. Several of the farm raised adolescents were planning careers in veterinary medicine and horticulture. There were no gender differences within the farm sample in their value of nature. Females and males were equally passionate when describing their feelings in this area. One female participant succinctly describes her relationship with nature and sense of environmental responsibility, as

it relates to farming:

> I: What kind of influence has living here in [her community] had on you?
> P: I think that I care about nature more because I live on a farm and I've just grown up with it. I think I'm more responsible, well actually I am more responsible. Everything is more like from the farm. The community doesn't really have that big of an influence on me.

A male participant, who recently left home to attend college, explains how leaving farm animals has affected him:

> I was just thinking about you said what I'd like to do, or something. I was thinking 'cause I always think of things that sound interesting. I've always been interested in animals and living on a farm. I think it would be neat, I highly doubt that I will ever do this again to have some kind of animals of my own. Large animals, not dogs and cats, not just dogs and cats. But, I mean, definitely, growing up on a farm has influenced my thoughts about that. And I always liked especially cows. I always liked them, been comfortable around them, a lot of things, other things I could think of.

Their appreciation of nature and animals was a clear theme that emerged from the data. They were not directly questioned about their feelings regarding nature. This type of response was unique to the farm participants in our matched sample, but was found more generally among rural adolescents by Hedlund (1993) and Vollmer and Hedlund (1994). An affinity with animals, however, does seem to be a value found only among the farm group.

Most of the participants felt positive about being raised on a farm. They felt that they had close family relationships, closeness with animals and a sense of accomplishment that was all a part of their farm upringing. Approximately 60% described their relationship to farming in these positive terms. The only

participants to describe their farming experience in purely negative terms were three of the young women in the farm sample who expressed an apparent disdain for their farming lifestyle. They did not elaborate on why they disliked it so much, but their intensity was noticeable. Despite these individuals, the much more frequent response regarding farming was a positive one. Several of the participants, however, described disadvantages that they recognized resulting from being raised on a farm. These were not the same participants who were decidedly against farming. Disadvantages that were described included being kept away from other more enjoyable activities and creating a separation from other nonfarm raised peers. One male high school graduate described his concerns in the following way:

> I dislike that sometimes, none of my friends, have farms or live on farms or anything like that. So a lot of times I have to be home doing stuff when everybody else can just go out and do whatever they want to and, like, especially during the summer, like nobody knows, nobody really knows just how much I do. A lot of times I kind of feel stuck when I have to stay home and do stuff when everybody else is going somewhere.

A 12th grade male voices a similar concern when asked if he ever resented having to work on a farm:

> Especially when I was younger. When we first started, we were like six and seven and we did little things. It was nothing hard. It was just that we had to go out and do it. And, umm, instead of watching cartoons like your friends were on Saturday mornings you're washing these milking machines. Come on, I want to do something else. Umm, yeah, there's even time now when I get... When I'm in a bad mood or you can think of one hundred things you'd rather be doing. But, yeah.

Along with the feelings of accomplishment there is also some frustration over the responsibilities that they were "born" into. The difference in the lifestyles

of these adolescents who are raised on farms has tended to alienate them from their peers and from the carefree lives they think their nonfarm peers lead. One can understand how these adolescents would develop closer ties to family than to peers, given the amount of time that they ultimately spend with each. This last quote from a male senior exemplifies both the positive and negative features of being raised on a farm and how it effects many of the areas discussed throughout this paper:

> I: Do you think that there's a different between the kind of people that farm families are as opposed to people who are employed by [a local large company]. Do you see similarities or differences in people?
> P: Well, I see both sometimes. Like their similar in that people are interested in what your other family members are doing and the differences really are the amount that people do together.
> I: Tell me about that.
> P: Like well, for my father and I, we're working together all the time and you start a different relationship from working than family. And whether you got somebody that's like working at [the company] and their kids are going to school and working someplace else, they can't really get together on what they're doing.
> I: So you think that you and your Dad maybe have kind of a special relationship because you know each other...
> P: We have, you have your father-son relationship then you have a working relationship where you're not really father and son you're two people working together.
> I: And how do you like that?
> P: That's, well, and as I say we spend most of our time that way. And for myself I received responsibilities early in life and it's like I grew up faster. I see things different than other students.
> I: Does that give you a feeling that you were trusted earlier to be responsible?
> P: Right.
> I: So how do you think that's affected you?

P: Well, I got the trust of my parents and other relatives sooner and, so that I kinda got into my own decision making a lot sooner. Where people in school, their parents, some of their parents still are making their major decisions for them. I say that I grew up faster than everybody, not everybody but most everybody, and it's helped me and it's hurt me.
I: Tell me how?
P: Well, it's hurt me in the ways that I have problems relating with other students my age and understanding how they're thinking cause I kinda like skipped that part. But it helped me in the fact that I can deal with teachers in an adult manner cause I've been at that stage longer.
I: That's interesting. That's a real interesting perspective. So do you think overall that having this trust and responsibility earlier, do you think overall that's a good or bad influence on you?
P: Overall I feel that there's more good come out of it than bad. That what I got out of it, is this part of not being in with the gang of guys and going out all the time but I got my responsibility and I keep wanting more.

He recognizes both the advantages and the disadvantages to farming. From his perspective, farming is a real trade off: you get the respect and responsibility that often adolescents have to fight for, but you also lose some of the enjoyment and protection that adolescents are usually entitled to. You get the rapport and a close relationship with your parents, but in return lose much of the camaraderie of peer friendships.

Closing thoughts

The picture of farm raised rural adolescents that emerge from this study is unique from other rural adolescents in important ways. These inferences we have drawn are meant to identify some of the many characteristics of a unique population and should not be considered definitive.

First, farm raised adolescents seem to share a close relationship with their parents and other family members in a more frequent and impacting way than their

nonfarm peers. Second, they appear less involved in peer activities and seem more isolated from their peers than nonfarm raised adolescents. Third, they appear less likely to be planning on attending a four year college to pursue a higher degree than their nonfarm peers. They also seem unlikely to plan on continuing with farming as an occupation, a change from the past when adolescents raised on farms frequently planned on taking over the family farm in their parent's retirement. Fourth, they describe a self identity and value system that accenuates hard work, independence and responsibility. They also value the outdoors, nature and animals with great intensity. Fifth, they generally seem to value their experience of being raised on a farm and see the farm experience as being responsible for instilling many of their strong personal values.

In many ways, the young farm people in our study embody the qualities of Wendall Berry's agrarian philosophy (Thompson & Kutach, 1990). It seems important to us to do whatever we can to nurture this segment of our population so these values can live in our society. We can learn from them. Their hard work and dedication is an incredible asset that is often overlooked and undervalued in our society. During a time when adolescents are often seen as the "lazy" generation or "Generation X" it is inspiring to see these young farm people having responsibiliy and pride in their many accomplishments.

Participants also identified some disadvantages to being raised on a farm, including isolation from peers and a lack of free time. Finally, there is an

important gender difference within the farm raised sample. The males were the most likely to confide in family, the least likely to confide in friends and the least likely to participate in activities. They were also the most likely to describe themselves as having a strong work ethic. Although these patterns clealy emerged in both the males and the females within the farm sample, the intensity expressed by males was greater.

With this description of farm youths in mind, we can start to look at how to address the needs of this unique population. Given the financial stress of farm life in general, and the tendency of farm adolescents to confide in their family over their outside peers, it is a challenging task for nonfamily members to encourage and support these individuals. Respecting their preferences and values, however, is the first step in that direction. Once we are better able to recognize who these farm raised adolescents are and what they desire, we can work toward creating a more supportive environment for them to grow in. For example, developing community activities that engage the entire family unit and accomodate farmers' busy schedules may be a way of increasing social support and interaction for these farm raised adolescents.

Our conclusions generally support earlier research on farm youth and provide a fuller understanding of who these young adults are. We hope that this understanding will be helpful to educators, community leaders and parents in providing support and guidance for this important segment of the population.

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